This is why i've got the earth day blues; Our planet's prognosis has never been more grim, or our mission more vital

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FULL TEXT

There are so many ways to "celebrate" Earth Day on Monday, no matter where in the Montreal area you live.

In fact, festivities got underway over the weekend. Mont-St-Hilaire hosted a conference on birds on Saturday, while Châteauguay offered a zero-waste workshop and Westmount organized a clothing swap. There are opportunities to test-drive electric bikes and ad campaigns urging people to walk instead of drive.

On Sunday, students and environmental groups held a major climate march, gathering in the shadow of Mount Royal and proceeding down Parc Ave.

Sometime this week, I'll rally my kids, roll up my sleeves and fill a trash bag with rubbish lying around my neighbourhood in what has become a citizen-led tradition, as it has in countless other communities.

Groups have been clearing parks and public spaces across the metropolitan region. On Sunday, UrbaNature, Sauvons la falaise and Grands Parcs Montréal teamed up to scour the Cour Turcot, a brand new section that has just been added to the Falaise St-Jacques nature area.

These are all noble and important efforts.

As Mayor Valérie Plante said when she collected litter in Ville-Marie borough last week, blue-collar workers may be out doing their annual spring cleaning operation, but it's everyone's duty to keep Montreal tidy. A recent study by Organisation Bleue showed us the consequences of our carelessness. It found trash from urban areas that enters the waterways along the St. Lawrence River ends up as plastic pollution on pristine beaches in Anticosti and Îles de la Madeleine if we don't take responsibility for our own mess.

Earth Day - and Earth Week - is intended to be a feel-good occasion that empowers people to take care of the planet and appreciate nature.

But forgive me if I don't feel like "celebrating" this year. Without wanting to be a downer, the prognosis for the planet is so grim, the progress on transitioning to a sustainable way of life so halting, that I can't help but feel all these well-meaning gestures are inadequate in the face of the scale of the emergency.

The head of the United Nations climate agency recently warned humankind that we have just two years left to save the planet.

"Who exactly has two years to save the world? The answer is every person," said Simon Stiell during a speech in London. "We still have a chance to make greenhouse gas emissions tumble, with a new generation of national climate plans. But we need these stronger plans, now."

It sounded like a warning from some kind of action movie, but the pronouncement barely registered. After all, the alarm was sounded decades ago and the clock has been ticking more loudly since 2018, when a landmark scientific report found that climate change is occurring faster and at a higher threshold than previously forecast.

Yet our heads remain buried in the sand.

Never mind the warnings of some future catastrophe; we're living the effects of global warming now. March once again shattered temperature records. Copernicus, the European Union climate agency, said that each of the last 10 months were the hottest on the books, while the most recent 12-month period was also the most scorching year

measured. In fact, between last April and this March, the mercury averaged 1.58 C above pre-industrial levels. So much for the commitments of the Paris Accord. Meanwhile, ocean temperatures are way above normal.

In the past year, we've also felt the devastating repercussions of climate change in our own backyards, from fires to flooding to tornadoes to ice storms. The extreme weather burns, breaks and weakens the trees we so desperately need to cool the air and absorb carbon.

Yet last week, everyone was freaking out about a sudden hike in gas prices. If only people were as concerned about a long-foretold rise in global temperatures.

Or, for that matter, the lack of funding for operating and building public transit in both the Quebec and federal budgets, given 43 per cent of our greenhouse gas emissions come from transportation. Or the backfilling of wetlands to build an electric car battery plant. Or that only a small fraction of the plastic we put in our blue bins is actually getting recycled. To name a few examples.

Obviously I've come down with a case of the Earth Day blues - part eco-anxiety, part existential angst.

To be clear, I'm all for picking up litter, transforming the lawn into something other than grass, planting trees and all that.

But every day must be Earth Day - or else we're missing the point. ahanes@postmedia.com

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